NOVEL

THE CLOSE AND THE FAR BUT NEVER QUITE THE JUST

ALBA PRATALIA

the close and the far but never quite the just

by Alba Pratalia

Sam sat hunched at the end of the mahogany bar, tie loosened, eyes blurred by whiskey and neon. The clock read 2:45 a.m.—quarter to three—and the place was dead silent except for the slow hum of the ceiling fan and the faint scratch of a record spinning some old tune nobody cared about anymore. Nobody, that is, except Sam.

Joe, the bartender, had polished the same glass three times, but he didn't complain. He knew the look: a man carrying a torch that was burning holes in his chest.

"Set 'em up, Joe," Sam muttered, voice rasping like gravel and cigarette smoke. "I got a story you oughta know."

Joe slid a glass down the bar. The whiskey shivered, amber under the jaundiced light. Sam lifted it, stared at it like it might answer back.

"We're drinking, my friend," Sam went on, "to the end of a brief episode." He paused, let the words

hang. His smile was crooked, tragic. “So make it one for my baby, and one more for the road.”

Joe didn’t ask questions. That was part of the code. A gentleman didn’t spill everything, and a bartender didn’t pry. But Sam couldn’t stop himself. The silence was too heavy.

“You’d never know it,” Sam said, “but buddy—I’m a kind of poet.” He tapped the rim of his glass. “Got a lot of things I wanna say. But hell, Joe… if I talk too much, just drown me out with the jukebox.”

The record sighed into another verse. Sad. Easy. Like smoke drifting toward the door.

“That torch I found—it’s gotta be drowned. Or else it’ll explode.” Sam drained the glass, set it down with a soft clink that echoed too loud in the empty bar.

Joe poured another. Sam lifted it halfway, then lowered it. His hand trembled. He nodded toward

the dark doorway, where the city waited with its lonely neon streets.

“So make it one for my baby,” he whispered, almost like prayer. Then, with a half-smirk that tried to pretend it was a joke:

“And Joe… make one for yourself. You’ll need it more than I will.”

He tossed the drink back, stood, and walked into the night. The door creaked shut behind him. The fan hummed. The jukebox spun. And Joe, alone now, finally poured himself a glass.

Sam lifted the collar of his coat in the cold air of the wee small hours. The city had gone to sleep without

him, leaving behind only the smell of damp pavement, the echo of a taxi two blocks away, and the kind of silence that pressed on the ribs.

He tilted his head back, looked up at the indifferent pricks of light above, and cursed them. Stars, smug little bastards. They had been shining over every mistake he'd ever made. They had watched him stagger out of worse joints than Joe's, crawl into worse beds than he wanted to remember, and they hadn't blinked once. Eternal voyeurs.

His feet dragged him forward anyway—an overrun, over-mileaged carcass in motion, clinging to the momentum of habit. Ankles sore, knees screaming, spine rusted like the hinge of a door no one had oiled in years.

Two tramadol went under his tongue. They tasted like chalk and stale regret. He let the bitterness dissolve, slow, poisonous, maybe merciful.

He exhaled a foggy cloud into the streetlamp glow and muttered to no one:
“Existing sucks.”

And the street, true to form, didn’t argue.

Then a couple of hands—thick, calloused, smelling of cheap soap and cheaper whiskey—shot out of a half-open door and **yanked Sam inside**.

“What the fuuuck?” he croaked, his boots scraping the threshold as the night vanished behind him.

The door slammed. Darkness swallowed him whole, except for a bare bulb dangling overhead, swaying like a drunk metronome. The room smelled of dust, old plaster, and sweat that wasn’t his.

Two figures loomed. One had a jaw like a cinderblock and eyes that never blinked. The other wore a grin too wide, like he'd practiced it in a cracked mirror until it stopped looking human.

"Sam," the grinning one said, as if they were old friends meeting for cocktails. "We were starting to think you'd never stumble by."

Sam staggered upright, coat crooked, collar still raised. "Sorry, fellas. Wrong sidewalk. I was aiming for oblivion, not amateur kidnapping night."

The cinderblock stepped closer. Sam caught the faint perfume of brass knuckles in his pocket.

The grin widened. "Sit down, poet. You've got something we need."

Sam, aching everywhere, tramadol souring his tongue, squinted at them.
"Pal, the only thing I've got left is heartburn and an overdraft fee."

Grin leaned forward, teeth glinting under the bare bulb, like a wolf in a bad suit.
“We needed the most miserable bastard on the face of the earth. We were hiring a starving crippled child in Biafra, but he recommended you.”

Sam blinked, tramadol still fizzing under his tongue. “Oh, good old ’Mbuto. How is he?”

“Dead.”

“Oh yeah, of course.” Sam sighed, adjusted his collar, as if the news were about the weather. “Well, I’m your man, for sure. So, how can I help you gentlemen?”

Grin’s shadow stretched across the wall like a crooked sermon. “We need you to find the way to… happiness.”

Sam squinted. His face looked like it was trying to fold itself into an origami crane of disbelief. “Say what, now?”

“You see, Sam,” Grin purred, “the way to make a man happy may not be the same for the next man. But what makes the most miserable man happy, must work for all men alike.”

Sam groaned. “You’re being macho-eist here.”

“We mean *man* as a synecdoche for humankind and you know it very well,” Grin snapped, suddenly defensive in the way only pedants can be.

Sam tilted his head. “Why didn’t you say *woman*, then?”

Grin’s grin grew teeth. “You have seen a woman sad, depressed, even crushed by life. But have you ever seen a woman down to miserable?”

Sam opened his mouth. Then shut it. Then opened it again, and closed it once more like a fish considering a cigarette.

“Good point,” he admitted.

The cinderblock in the corner finally spoke, voice low as gravel:
“So, Sam. The fate of the species is riding on you. Find the key to happiness. Or else.”

Sam scratched the back of his neck, looked at the bare bulb, then muttered, “Christ. I’d have preferred the beating.”

Before Sam could piece together whether this was philosophy or just a mugging with extra dialogue, the same rough hands shoved him hard in the ribs. He stumbled backwards, out the door, boots scraping concrete, coat flapping like a dying crow.

Then—*whump*—a suitcase flew after him, smacked him square in the chest. He staggered, grunted, but his arms, more out of reflex than strength, closed

around it. The damned thing was heavier than regret.

Sam: “What’s with all the yanking and shoving? I’m a wreck, but I can still walk through doors, you know.”

From inside, muffled but sharp: “It’s to make a point. Now get!”

Sam stared at the closed door, his breath fogging in the cold. “Any chance to call me a cab?”

The answer came in the form of the door slamming shut. Then came the metallic rattle: one lock, two locks, three, four, five—like a paranoid symphony of deadbolts. Whoever they were, they weren’t planning on Sam coming back for a chat.

The street was empty again. Silent. Except for Sam, hunched under a flickering streetlamp, holding a suitcase that hummed with mystery and bruised ribs.

He gave the suitcase a shake. It didn't rattle. That was either a good sign, or a very bad one.

Sam: "Well, here's to happiness, I guess. God help us all if it's in this box."

Sam sat on the low stone sill outside the shuttered joint, suitcase balanced between his knees, muttering to himself about Uber being the one true miracle of modern life. Not antibiotics, not space travel, not even Netflix—no, the blessed invention was "press button, drunk wreck appears home."

He tried not to look like a man with a suitcase full of God-knows-what, because even in the dead streets, there were eyes. Not for fear of being robbed—hell, getting robbed would almost be refreshing—but because the *paperwork* after losing a phone was the real nightmare. A new SIM card, the endless calls to banks, the sludgy process of changing every

password. Nobody deserved that kind of purgatory. Except him. Tonight, he figured he probably did.

The Uber rolled up. Beige Toyota, smelling faintly of pine air freshener and despair. Sam slid into the backseat, suitcase clutched like a pet. “Drive,” he croaked.

The driver—mid-forties, ball cap, dead eyes—didn’t ask where. The app had already damned them both.

Sam flipped the latches. The suitcase clicked open.

And there it was. The oldest, creakiest cliché in the pulp handbook: neat stacks, thick bundles, wrapped with rubber bands. Except—no banknotes.

Checks.

Every single bundle was checks. Signed. Different names, different signatures, different dates scribbled in quick hands, all ranging neatly between eight and twelve thousand. Every one of them *bearer*.

Sam chuckled, the sound like a smoker trying to whistle. “Well hello, bar-tab budget. I might have found the mission goal already.”

He riffled through them, the papers fluttering like a flock of rectangular birds. A fortune in nickel-and-dime increments. Enough to drink the city dry. Enough to buy his own Joe’s Bar and run the jukebox forever. Enough to fund happiness, in the most miserable man’s sense of the word.

From the front seat, the Uber driver glanced at the rearview mirror. Just once. Just long enough to see the open suitcase. Then his eyes returned to the road.

Sam snapped the case shut, leaned back, and muttered: “Drive faster.”

First morning of the *Bar Tab Budget™*.

Sam woke up in the manner of a man whose liver had long ago signed a collective bargaining agreement with the rest of his organs: *no hangovers, only static*. The dizziness wasn't punishment, just a gentle nudge—"hey champ, you're running on fumes, let's bounce this back up to drunkness."

He cracked a beer from the fridge. It was warm, but it was just an amuse-bouche anyway. He showered like a man laundering evidence, put on his least stained shirt, and marched out.

First stop: the bank. He chose three random checks—dated conveniently "around today"—slid them under the glass, and watched the teller's face like a card shark. They slid into his account without fuss. He was now solvent, which in his language meant he was free to drink like a solvent.

Second stop: the bar where both Bukowski and Sinatra had allegedly drunk, though probably not

together. (If they had, the Earth's crust would've cracked.)

He slid into a booth, waved off the menu like an old flame, and ordered the kind of breakfast that makes doctors sigh: **two eggs Benedict, one pint of aggressively spicy Bloody Mary, and two tequila shots on the side.**

The waiter, who had the bearing of a man who once dodged machine-gun fire but now dodged only drunk complaints about "light beer," set down the plate. "Quite the breakfast, my man!"

Sam raised an eyebrow, produced a crisp hundred-dollar bill, and placed it delicately on the table, as if tipping God. "Keep this *man of yours* lubricated, good sir."

The bill vanished into the waiter's apron faster than you could say—well, faster than you could recite *the entirety of Churchill's 'We shall fight on the*

beaches' speech while balancing a tray of oysters and three martinis.

The old waiter gave the tiniest nod, the kind of nod that carried the weight of Normandy beaches and fifty years of seeing every bastard walk in off the street thinking they were the second coming of Hemingway.

Sam raised his Bloody Mary like it was a flag. "To checks and balances," he said to no one. Then he bit into the eggs, yolk spilling like sunlight, and for one luxurious moment, he almost believed in happiness.

The martinis at that joint had a reputation: **famously cheap, famously small.** Not "stingy" small, but "civilized" small, the kind of glass size designed back when people still thought moderation was something you could accessorize.

Sam admired that. He'd seen the modern martini trend—big conical fishbowls you could drown a carp in, sweating themselves into lukewarm brine before you'd even got through the first anecdote. No, this bar stuck to tradition: the little carved ice cups, cold enough to freeze your lips if you kissed them too long, each drink a quick, bracing hit that never had the chance to turn tepid.

That was the true science of the **three-martini lunch**. Nobody in their right mind ever sat down at noon and drank three modern "airline hangar" martinis—that was practically a liter of gin, a sure path to obituary pages. But three of these sharp little jewels? That was the poetry of balance.

The ritual went like this:

- **One** to kill the time before the food arrived, keeping you braced against the chatter of your lunch companion.
- **One** to accompany the salad and the first dignified half of your steak.

- One to polish off the second half of the steak, when dignity had already left the room but appetite still lingered.

Sam swirled his first, admired how the carved glass caught the light. He'd always liked those cups. They felt like artifacts from an era when *being drunk at lunch was a professional credential*.

He downed it in a clean gulp, set it on the table with a nod to the invisible ghosts of ad men past, and muttered:

"Gentlemen, I'm keeping the faith."

By 10:58, Sam couldn't stand straight. He leaned against the bar like a man in an old shipwreck, mast splintering, ocean roaring in his ears.
By 11:34, he couldn't sit straight either. The booth

had turned traitor, tilting sideways, and gravity itself had joined the conspiracy.

That's when the Normandy waiter appeared, silent and efficient, the way only a man who'd once dodged bullets could be. He eased Sam's arm across his own shoulder, the old strength in him still steady as an oak.

"Follow me, sir," he said, and for Sam, in his gin-drenched fog, it was less an invitation than a commandment from on high.

They shuffled down the corridor past the restrooms—doors marked GENTS and LADIES floating by like relics of another life—until the waiter pressed open a hidden door at the end. Darkness first. Then, light.

A room revealed itself. Sofas everywhere—lined against the walls, clustered in the center, arranged like soft islands for the shipwrecked. The air was

cool, heavy with the hush of velvet and forgotten promises.

The waiter guided Sam down onto one, helped him recline as though placing a general into his final command chair. Then, with the efficiency of a man who had ferried many fallen soldiers, he slid a bucket gently beneath Sam's head.

"For our best patrons only, sir," the waiter said with a small bow.

Sam's eyelids fell. The world blurred. And for the first time in weeks—months, maybe—he felt a clean, uncorrupted happiness, silly and vast. His lips stretched into a grin that seemed to belong to a younger man, a man less broken, less used up.

And with that great, ridiculous smile plastered across his face, Sam blacked out.

Sam woke up in total darkness. Not dream-darkness, not blackout-darkness—*room-darkness.* That coffin-thick kind where you feel around and wonder if maybe you died and no one told you.

And still, because the body doesn't care where you are, his brain came alive with that dreadful panic that only ever arrives when you wake up at the wrong hour. That sensation—anguish, pressure on the chest, like the day was already happening *without him*.

He sat up, groaning, and the room answered: **the lights flicked on automatically.**

He squinted. The hidden patrons' lounge. Sofas. Silence. And there, like some shrine arranged by an unseen priest, a tray on a low stool beside him:

- **Metamizol tablets**—fast-acting, illegal as sin in this jurisdiction. Contraband comfort.

- A sweating **Gatorade bottle**, neon blue, promising electrolytes and absolution.
- And—most gloriously—**several ice-cold vodka shots**, their glasses frosted, waiting to be swallowed like little silver bullets of relief.

Sam stared, then chuckled, his throat raw but his soul amused.

"Some bar this is," he muttered.

He downed a vodka. The cold raced through him, dragging the anguish back down into the pit where it belonged. He chased it with a swig of Gatorade, the chemical sweetness burning hope into his veins.

The metamizol sat in his palm like forbidden candy. He swallowed one dry, grinned, and leaned back against the sofa.

If this was how the "best patrons" were treated, then maybe—just maybe—he'd found the closest thing to happiness on the goddamn planet.

Sam pushed open the door back into the bar—hair a bird's nest, shirt crumpled, the faint aroma of "man who has slept fully clothed on a sofa intended for dying in."

The regulars turned their heads. And like some sitcom gag that had crossed timelines, the whole room erupted in a cheer. Someone even hollered, *"Noooorm!"*

Sam grinned, shuffled to a stool, slapped the bar with the authority of a man who'd already used up his authority for the decade.
"Mini-martini me!"

Joe behind the bar started the delicate ritual of carving ice. And then the Normandy waiter appeared, silent as a ghost, leaning close.

In a voice soft as sand through fingers:
“Everything to your liking, sir?”

Sam nodded, eyes glassy. “All the best, my good man. Those vodka pick-me-ups were just heaven-sent.”

The waiter’s lips twitched into something almost like a smile. “Happiness, sir, is enjoying them… but not *needing* them.”

Sam froze, like a man just told his dog could recite Shakespeare.
“…Oh fuck. This isn’t it then, right?”

The waiter tilted his head. “What is *what*, sir?”

Sam fumbled, pulled another hundred-dollar bill, and slid it onto the waiter’s tray with a magician’s resignation. “Never mind, old man. Just think about Sainte-Mère-Église.”

The waiter’s eyes glimmered, far away. “Those were the days, sir. You could just step behind the man

who stole your British war wife, slit his throat and say *'oh no, the Nazis."*

Sam blinked. "…What?"

The waiter blinked. "…What?"

The martini landed between them with a satisfying clink. Neither said another word.

Sam sat in the waiting room, staring at a glossy magazine that may or may not have been upside down. Could've been a *Car & Driver*, could've been *Cosmopolitan*. The words all wobbled like they'd been drinking with him.

The door opened. A man in tweed and rimless glasses leaned out. "Sam?"

Sam pushed himself to his feet, steadied himself with the kind of wobble that looked like modern dance, and followed in. The psychiatrist gestured to a chair, all polite formality. Sam sat, swaying slightly, as though the chair were at sea.

"Now," the doctor said, folding his hands. "What's bothering you, Sam?"

Sam leaned forward, put on his most serious face. "Doc… I have *Cenosillicaphobia*."

The psychiatrist didn't blink. He simply raised one arm, pointed squarely at the door. "OUT."

Sam gaped. "What…?"

"I can smell gin from here," the doctor snapped. "And that's the easiest, sorriest prank in the book. I get one of these once a month. Because Twitter or Instagram shows you the word. It's not real. It's not funny. And I, genius, am a five-hundred-dollars-

per-session professional. That's how much your little gag is costing you."

Sam stared at him, then shrugged. He reached into his coat, pulled out a loose wad of bearer-check-cashed bills, and let it fall to the floor in a sloppy fan. Somewhere between two and five grand, easy.

"Here," Sam slurred, "buy yourself something nice. Pastel, I recommend. Your palette definitely leaves you too stressed."

And with that, he stood, pocketed the upside-down magazine from the waiting room (he was curious to see what it actually said once the blur wore off), and staggered out without another word.

The psychiatrist sat frozen, staring at the heap of bills on the carpet. Then, slowly, he closed the door, locked it, and muttered:
"…Pastel, huh?"

Sam stood in the middle of the sidewalk, coat half-buttoned, hair in a state of rebellion, thinking aloud: "Therapy: *struck off the list.*"

Then the gears turned.
"Wait. I have no pen. No pad. No list. I need… a secretary."

He whipped out his phone like a knight unsheathing a blade and barked into it:
"Alexa, find me a secretary."

Nothing.

"Alexa?" Silence.
"Siri?" Silence.
"Google?" Silence.
"Delphic Oracle? Our Lady of Fatima? Chuck Norris?" Nothing but pigeons.

Sam groaned, spotted a kid in sneakers and ironic sunglasses, and flagged them down. “Excuse me, can you help me? I’m trying to work that Alexa thing…”

The Gen Z’er took one look at the cracked screen. “Sir, that is an Android.”

Sam blinked. “…And is that a thing?”

The kid pinched their nose bridge like they were dealing with a grandparent who’d just asked what Wi-Fi tasted like. “Sir, what do you actually need?”

Sam reached into his coat, produced a crisp hundred-dollar bill. “I need to find a secretary. Keep this if you can find me an agency, a recruitment center, something.”

The Gen Z’er stared at the bill. Their eyes lit up like a slot machine jackpot. “What a lucky day—for you, sir! And for me! I happen to be a very qualified

secretary just looking for a new job! What a coincidence, eh?"

Sam squinted at them, then chuckled, raspy and amused. "What indeed. I used to pull the same scams when I was your age, kid, but we were smoother."

The kid winced. "Sorry, sir. It's my first time…"

Sam slapped them on the shoulder. "But I appreciate the spirit. You're hired. Effective immediately. We need to write a list. Got pen and paper?"

"I can record on my phone," the kid offered.

Sam waved that away. "We'll get you proper pen and paper next stop. Name?"

"Shamaya."

Sam froze, squinted, lips moving as though tasting the syllables. "……"

“You okay, sir?”

“I’ll call you Loretta.”

“Sir, I—”

Sam pulled out *three more hundreds*, folded them like origami destiny.

“Loretta,” the kid corrected instantly, snapping to attention. “Loretta at your service, sir.”

Next stop: the stationery shop.

Loretta emerged from the place like a human porcupine—fake-leather notepads bulging from under both arms, pens sticking out of every available pocket, one clipped to her collar like a military decoration.

Sam clapped his hands once, dramatically. “Right then. Write down. A list. Of things. That lead to happiness.”

Loretta licked the tip of a pen (old-school, classy move), flipped a notepad open, and poised herself like a court stenographer.
“So, what’s the *plot of the book*, sir?”

Sam stopped dead, tilted his head, narrowed his eyes. “…My boy.” He squinted harder. “…Boy?… Girl?… Inter-thingy…?” He waited, hand raised like a conductor about to cue the violins.

Loretta just smiled politely, pen hovering over the page, expression carved from professional marble.

Sam flapped his hand. “So, anyway, my good *human*. This is not a book. This is a *quest!*”

Loretta raised an eyebrow, scribbling the word *Quest* in neat block letters at the top of the page.

“We’re not going to be a pantomime of Quixote and Sancho Panza, are we, sir?”

Sam slapped the air as if swatting at the ghost of Cervantes. “Not at all, my human, not at all. Cervantes is way too good for me. I’d make a Louis L’Amour at best.”

Loretta’s pen paused, then: “Should I get the San Carlos reservation on the line, sir?”

Sam blinked. “…Not yet, Loretta. Not yet.”

Loretta jotted something down under the first item. Sam leaned over. She’d written:

List of Things That Lead to Happiness

1. Hire a secretary.

Sam chuckled. “Off to a fine start.”

Sam tapped his chin with the back of a chewed-up pen. “Let’s see if killing someone makes the trick.”

Loretta froze mid-scribble. “Sir, if I may—”

Sam snapped his head around. “*What*, Loretta, what? Morality now?”

Loretta straightened her notepad like it was a shield. “I wouldn’t dare, sir.”

Sam leaned back, eyes narrowing. “Shoot a man in Reno, just to watch him die.”

“Yes, sir,” Loretta said briskly, as though acknowledging the weather report. “But… might we put that at the *end* of the to-do list?”

Sam frowned. “Why?”

Loretta glanced down, almost embarrassed. “I really need this job. I majored in aerospace engineering. Market’s grim.”

Sam stared at her, then nodded gravely. “I understand. I’ll try to keep killing to a minimum.”

“Appreciated, sir.”

“Can we keep it under detectable level for the next five to seven years?”

Sam scratched his jaw, as though considering supply chains. “…That’s a fair request. Can you make good martinis?”

Loretta’s polite smile flickered into something warmer. “I can always learn, sir.”

Sam slapped his thigh. “That’s the spirit! Let’s go to Joe’s.”

Loretta flipped to a fresh page of her brand-new leather-bound notebook and wrote:

Happiness List, Addendum

- Martini training: URGENT.

- Homicide: optional / deferred.

Together they turned down the street, Sam weaving slightly, Loretta adjusting the weight of ten notepads under one arm like a squire lugging shields for a knight who had already forgotten the quest.

This was not the Sinatra–Bukowski hybrid lounge, the polished joint with leather stools, marble counters, and a bartender coincidentally named Joe. No, Sam had dragged Loretta somewhere far stranger, deeper into the mythos.

This was **the Joe's**. The **real Joe's**. The *one-more-for-the-road* Joe's.

A hole-in-the-wall, half-forgotten, walk-down-the-stairs kind of place on the edge of the city where the streetlamps flickered only out of habit. A

neighborhood so obscure the Shamaya-version-of-Loretta had never even seen it on Google Maps. She stood at the top of the steps, frowning at her phone, which refused to admit the location existed.

Sam descended like a pilgrim returning to his shrine, the stink of mildew and spilled rye thick in the stairwell. Down there, no marble counters. No craft ice. No cocktail menus written in ironic chalk handwriting. This was a kingdom where glassware was optional and the only question the bartender ever asked was *"how much."*

There were no cocktails here. Only pours. Whiskey, gin, rum, vodka—if it flowed, it poured. If you wanted fancy, you said *"g&t."* And even that was considered suspiciously continental.

Sam leaned over to Loretta as they crossed the sticky floor. "Last fancy drink anyone ordered here was a gin and tonic."

Loretta raised a brow. "When was that, sir?"

Sam let his lips curl into a grin. “Nineteen eighty-seven. By an Australian.”

Loretta looked around at the scarred bar, the cracked mirror, the bartender who looked as though he had been here since Truman was president. She clutched her notepad tighter, whispering, “Sir, are you… sure this is where happiness is found?”

Sam slapped the bar with both palms, the sound echoing like a gunshot in church. “Loretta, my human, if happiness isn’t here, it doesn’t exist anywhere at all.”

The bartender didn’t nod. Didn’t smile. Just poured. And poured again.

Sam squinted at Loretta, already slouched on his stool like a detective between confessions. "Loretta, what's your poison?"

Loretta blinked. "Sir?"

"Your *drink of choice,* human."

Loretta leaned closer, whispering like a spy passing state secrets. "Not the place to say kombucha, is it, sir?"

Sam barked a laugh that rattled his ice bucket lungs. "Joe, my secretary's having club soda for the night. He's… she's… *they're* working."

Joe, who hadn't blinked since 1973, wordlessly set down a tall glass with soda fizzing inside. A lime wedge—if it could be called lime—perched on the rim. Its color wavered somewhere between blue and orange, the exact shade of "fruit left in the fridge since the Reagan administration."

Sam got his own setup: a bottle, heavy as sin, and a glass, no ice. Joe's version of "help yourself."

Sam tapped the bottle like a priest blessing the chalice. "Now we're in business."

Loretta flipped her notebook open and jotted, quick and neat:

- Free drinks.

Then, circling the lime wedge with distaste, she added underneath:

- NOT blue-orange lime (NOT underlined three times, then underlined again for emphasis).

She shut the pad with the satisfied snap of a secretary who knew the difference between *order* and *chaos*.

Sam poured himself two fingers, lifted it in salute. “Loretta, my human, we may not have found happiness yet—but we’re circling the bastard.”

Joe didn’t nod. Didn’t smile. Just polished a glass with the intensity of a man trying to erase the concept of fingerprints from history.

Three hours later the bar was a slow aquarium of smoke and muttering. Sam had drifted to the deep end of the bottle, elbows propped, hair gone full scarecrow, eyes lit with the fire of a man convinced philosophy was a contact sport.

Sam jabbed a finger at the man across from him, some neighborhood relic in a cap older than Loretta. “No, no, no, sir—Camus did not *deny* humanity’s meaning. He didn’t care for that. What he denied

was its *accountability*. Its *liability*! We're free because nothing holds us to the warranty!"

The man across shook his head, waving a hand like batting away a fly. "No, no, no. I'm telling you—Babe Ruth never called his shot. Never. He just pointed at a hot dog vendor, and then accidentally hit a home run in that direction. That's all it was."

Loretta, perched dutifully on the next stool, notepad balanced on one knee, was writing it all down with the composure of a war correspondent:

- Camus = no liability clause.
- Babe Ruth = hot dog accident theory.

Sam slammed his empty glass on the counter and barked for a refill. "You see, Loretta? This is the problem with the century. People confuse home runs with hot dogs, and then they wonder why life feels absurd!"

Loretta nodded politely, pen scratching. She underlined:

- Absurd = baseball concession stands.

The man across the bar puffed up, raising his own glass. “And you, sir, are the only philosopher I’ve met who smells like a gin distillery and a taxi seat at the same time.”

Sam tipped his glass in salute. “That’s the *existential condition,* my friend.”

A man from the next table, who had been marinating himself in grappa for at least half a century, suddenly leaned over, waving his arms like a drowning philosopher:

“Prematurated supercazzola or are we joking? No, allow me, no I··· excuse me, we are four, as if it were *antani* also for you, only in two or even in four also scribbled with cofandina, like an anti-theft device, for example. Now, give me your index finger, yes, lift it like this, look, look, look, do you see the finger? Do you see it teasing, and even prematurely! But then I could also tell you, with all respect for authority, that even just those two things as deputy mayor, you understand? According to article 12, bear with me, otherwise postponed for two also a little *antani* in the prefecture! Not to mention that the prematurated supercazzola has lost contact with the tarapia tapioco, afterwards!”

The entire bar went silent for a second. Glasses froze halfway to lips.

Sam stared at him like he’d just been visited by an oracle on mushrooms. Then he slowly nodded, eyes narrowed.
“···That’s exactly what I’ve been saying about Camus.”

The Babe Ruth guy slammed his palm down. “No, no, no, that’s *Babe Ruth*! The supercazzola was aimed at the hot dog vendor, and by accident—boom!—home run.”

Loretta, scribbling furiously, mouthed the words as she wrote:

- **Supercazzola = antani = Camus liability clause.**
- Babe Ruth = tarapia tapioco.

Then she looked up, wide-eyed, pen trembling. “Sir… we may actually be onto something.”

Sam raised his glass, sloshing whiskey onto his sleeve. “Loretta, my human, if happiness isn’t in this room tonight, then it’s in a coffin under city hall.”

The grappa-man saluted with his empty glass, wobbling. “*Antani for everyone!*”

The bar roared approval. Joe didn’t even blink. He just poured.

Loretta came to with her cheek pressed against cool fake-leather, the faint stench of gin and rye vapors clinging to her like an extra skin. Her head throbbed from the fumes alone—second-hand alcoholism, occupational hazard.

When her eyes adjusted, she realized the bar had gone uncanny. Every patron sat frozen in their own booth, or hunched over their own stool, staring deep into their glasses like monks contemplating holy water. No chatter. No laughter. Just the collective hum of quiet misery, glowing faintly in amber liquid.

Across the room, Sam lifted his head from his glass. His eyes caught hers. He nodded once, slowly, as though delivering a verdict.

“All happy men are alike,” he muttered, voice rough as the floorboards. “Each miserable man is miserable in its own way.”

Loretta rubbed her temples, squinting at him. “You’re being macho-eist here.”

Sam’s lips tugged into the ghost of a smile. “You have seen a woman sad, depressed, even crushed by life. But have you ever seen a woman down to *miserable*?”

Loretta’s mouth opened. Shut. Opened again. Closed once more, like a fish deciding whether or not to try smoking.

“Fair point,” she admitted finally, voice almost a whisper.

The room seemed to shift with her words, every man in his booth nodding imperceptibly, acknowledging the miserable fraternity to which

they belonged. The bartender poured another round without being asked.

Sam leaned back in his stool, raised his glass toward Loretta, and said softly:
“Welcome to the quest.”

Loretta flipped her fake-leather notebook open, her pen scratching with bureaucratic finality. She struck a neat line through the latest entry:

Old dive bar — NOT the source of happiness.

She muttered, “We’re still hunting.”

Sam drained what was left in his glass, stared into the bottom as though it contained stars. “Hunting? Loretta, we never started. I came here for Joe.”

He thumbed toward the bar. “I owed him some tabs.”

At the counter, Joe didn’t even look up. He was licking his fingers, slow and greasy, flipping through a **very fat stack of hundreds** that bulged like a python digesting a deer. Each bill snapped with the sound of Sam’s past sins.

“Some tab indeed,” Joe grunted, expression unreadable.

Loretta glanced from the stack to Sam. “Sir… how *many* checks did you cash?”

Sam shrugged, as though the number of bearer checks laundered through liquor was the kind of trivia that didn’t matter. “Enough to keep the lights on. For Joe. For me. For the Brotherhood of Miserables.”

Joe paused his counting only long enough to mutter, “And for my kid’s orthodontics.”

Loretta scribbled furiously in her notepad:

- Happiness ≠ dive bar
- Happiness ≠ paying old bar tabs
- Happiness = ?

She tapped the page, looked at Sam, and asked: "Sir, what's next on the list?"

Sam leaned back, tilting his chair dangerously. His grin was half-ghost, half-dare.

"Loretta… next, we go upscale."

The penthouse was lit like the inside of a diamond. Floor-to-ceiling windows vomiting neon across the Vegas Strip, carpets thick as sins, and a smell of cocaine dust that had seeped into the very wallpaper.

On the glass table: rails so long they needed their own conductor, stretching like the Orient Express, powdered dreams with a timetable to nowhere.

Bootleg liquor bottles, ancient labels, propped up just for the irony of it—because what's classier than drinking something outlawed when your granddad was in diapers?

The guests? A menagerie of excess:

- Male and female prostitutes, half-pros, hoes, half-hoes.
- A New Orleans funeral band, blindfolded, blasting brass dirges with impeccable accuracy.
- Seven chimpanzees swinging from chandeliers.
- Two horses, huffing quietly at the buffet.
- And in the pool, filled to the brim with ice cubes, a polar bear bobbing like some bored god of winter.

And off to one side, an accountant from Cleveland, still in his tie, calculating God-knows-what on a travel-sized adding machine.

Sam spread his arms to it all. “Loretta, this—” he roared, tearing his clothes off in one dramatic rip, Velcro-stripped like a Chippendale at war, “—this is *upscale!*”

He cannonballed into the pool, splashing ice and polar bear alike. The bear barely twitched.

Loretta adjusted her notepad, coolly wrote a single word: Velcro.

Then, with the calm dignity of a professional secretary turned co-conspirator, she set the notebook down, stripped herself bare in equally efficient fashion, and stepped into the madness, one entry closer to defining happiness.

The chimpanzees cheered. The blindfolded brass band hit a triumphant note. The accountant from

Cleveland sighed, adjusted his glasses, and muttered, “This isn’t deductible.”

Sam came to in satin sheets that smelled of menthol cigarettes and zoo exhibits. The first thing he felt wasn’t the pounding in his skull, nor the stick of powder in his nose—it was the gentle, deliberate tracing of a claw on his chest.

He blinked. The polar bear lay beside him, staring deep into his soul with soft ursine eyes, drawing circles in his flesh like a lover signing their name. Sam smiled, leaned in, and sweetly frenched the bear. *Mee too, big guy. Mee too.*

Slipping into a hotel bathrobe (monogrammed with someone else’s initials, who cares), he padded barefoot into the suite’s main room.

Chaos reigned.

The prostitutes—male and female—had divided themselves into teams and were locked in a furious men vs women football match. Real football: round ball, foot to ball. None of the American leather-watermelon-by-hand charade. They slid across rugs worth more than mortgages, screaming with laughter.

Who had snorted the rails was obvious: the chimpanzees were *crawling upside-down along the ceiling,* Linda Blair-style, their heads turned backward like owls possessed by Satan, shrieking gospel hymns in chimpanzee screech.

Sam opened the other bedroom door at the far end of the penthouse.

He stopped. Blinked twice.

Inside: Loretta and the two horses, engaged in positions that would make a gynecologist weep and

an illustrator quit. It was a geometry lesson in heresy.

One horse, mid-thrust, whinnied over its shoulder: "Excuse us! Doors please!"

Sam closed the door instantly, hands up.

From inside came Loretta's ecstatic voice, tearing through dimensions:
"THIS! IS! HAPPYNEEEEEESSSSSSS!"

Both horses neighed in unison like a cathedral choir.

Sam tightened his bathrobe belt, poured himself a stiff whiskey from the minibar, and muttered:
"Well. Everyone's got their own definition."

When Loretta finally emerged from the second bedroom—robe half-tied, hair like Medusa had run

out of conditioner—Sam was sitting at the edge of the ice-cube pool, bathrobe flapping open, drinking straight from a bottle of something brown and nameless. His bare feet paddled lazily in the half-melted cubes.

Loretta squinted. “What happened?”

Sam took a long pull, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “The zookeeper came. Took the bear away.”

Loretta’s face softened. “Oh, you poor kid.”

“And the prostitutes,” Sam went on, “they kept faking injuries Neymar-style. Rolling on the floor, screaming, grabbing their shins. Until one of ’em actually got injured. Pulled a nail skin. Doctors say it’s serious. They’re all at the hospital now.”

Loretta gasped. “Oh no. The poor kid.”

Sam raised the bottle. “And the monkeys? Shat the whole place.”

Loretta sniffed the air, face contorting. "…This I can smell. So… strike this too, eh?"

She pulled her notepad from her robe pocket, scribbled *Vegas Penthouse Orgy: Not It* and underlined *NOT* six times.

From behind the closed bedroom door came the unmistakable sound of equine ecstasy—two horses neighing in stereo like Wagner had been commissioned for porn.

Sam tilted his head in their direction. "Oh, just go and make at least *them* happy."

Loretta snapped the notebook shut, straightened her robe like a soldier bracing for orders, and grinned. "Right on it, boss!"

She marched back into the bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind her.

Sam swirled the last sip in the bottle, stared into it, and muttered to himself:
"…I should've stayed with the bear."

Sam sat at the hotel restaurant like a man reprising a role he'd long ago mastered. His **signature breakfast** gleamed before him: two eggs Benedict dripping yolk like golden lava, a **pint of Bloody Mary** spiced so hard it could strip paint, and two tequila shots lined up as chasers.

He carved into an egg with surgeon's precision when Loretta appeared at the doorway. Her gait was… peculiar. Not quite a limp, not quite a shuffle. More like the stiff-legged shuffle of someone who had recently attempted something not recommended by *Gray's Anatomy* (the book, not the show).

She made it to the table, didn't say a word, just grabbed a tequila, downed it in one go, twisted her face like she'd licked fire, slapped the table twice with a flat palm, and immediately downed the other.

The glasses clinked back to the wood.

Loretta exhaled, eyes glassy, hair disheveled. Then, in a voice that was equal parts exhausted and oddly reverent, she declared:

"Equine love is··· a peculiar kind of love."

Sam put down his fork, reached across the table, and patted her hand gently. "There, there."

The waiter came by, didn't blink, just topped off Sam's Bloody Mary and slid a second one to Loretta. As if this, too, was just another Vegas breakfast shift.

Montecarlo greeted them with its usual smug perfection—yachts gleaming like dental veneers, casinos shimmering like temptations carved in glass, and every old man in a linen suit walking a dog that cost more than a small house.

Sam, breakfasted on three espressos and promptly washed down with **three bottles of Beaujolais**, took to the promenade with the swagger of a poet laureate of bad decisions.

The sun glared. The sea glittered. His stomach began to growl—low, guttural, *polar-bear-growl.* A reminder of his old lover from Vegas. And Sam, brave fool that he was, didn't resist. He let it go.

It started modest, then avalanched into catastrophe. **No restroom in sight. No mercy from fate.** A public disaster in silk trousers.

People turned. Women clutched pearls. Dogs barked. The sea breeze, once romantic, became a

malicious accomplice, carrying the smell in all directions.

He waddled, legs askew, leaving behind a trail that looked like an abstract installation. The promenade—Montecarlo's jewel—was suddenly transformed into a grotesque parody of itself:

- **Shit in the underwear.**
- **Shit between the legs.**
- **Shit filling the socks.**
- **Shit, Montecarlo, everywhere.**

Children pointed. Old men spat "*Mon dieu!*" with nasal fury. The whole promenade recoiled, half in horror, half in choreography, slipping and sliding as though the Riviera had become an ice rink of shame. A *patenoir de merd.*

Loretta caught up at a safe distance, handkerchief pressed to her nose. She didn't want to ask, but she did.
"Do I wanna know?"

Sam, still staggering with the dignity of a man who had soiled an entire principality, whispered:
“No.”

Loretta flipped her notepad open, scribbled quickly, and struck a fat line through:

Montecarlo: Not Happiness.

She sighed. “But I had to try.”

Sam leaned on the promenade rail, sweat dripping, eyes half-shut. “Loretta, my human… never again.”

Behind them, the Riviera still reeled, gagging under the weight of its new perfume.

Next thing you know, they’re in the internal patio of Napoleon House in New Orleans, the air thick with history, humidity, and the faint smell of spilled beer

that's never quite left the bricks. On the table between them: a muffuletta the size of a medium pizza, olives rolling off the edge like cannonballs.

Loretta licked some olive oil off her fingers, ears pricked. "They're playing Thelonious Monk, four hundred meters that way. Or Tuba Skinny, six hundred meters that way. Can you walk it?"

Sam tilted his head, body already groaning under Beaujolais, espresso, and years of collapse. "No way. But I'll try. Give me that old man's cane."

Loretta frowned. "Oh come on. He needs—"

Sam jabbed a finger. "Happiness for humanity, or one old man calling an Uber instead of walking?"

Loretta groaned, dragged it out like a curtain drop. "Fiiiiiine…" She swiped the cane with the dexterity of a pickpocket. The old man sighed, shrugged, and indeed pulled out his phone.

Later, the streets of the French Quarter: Loretta striding easily, notepad in hand. Sam limping behind her, cane clicking, sweat darkening his shirt.

“Don’t forget the cripple here!” Sam croaked.

“Just another hundred meters!” Loretta chirped.

Sam stopped dead. “That’s a whole football field. *The real one.* With feet. None of that watermelon-by-hand nonsense. Let me recharge batteries.”

He collapsed onto a plastic chair at one of those joints that advertise ALCOHOLIC SLUSHIES in Styrofoam cups the size of flowerpots.

“Passion fruit, my good man,” Sam ordered, gesturing like a Roman senator demanding execution.

Loretta gawked. “You? You drink thirty-five-year-old scotch.”

Sam took the cup, condensation dripping down his robe of despair. “And today my aching spine says: sit here, drink this··· or die.” He sucked on the straw with a grimace, neon-pink ice flooding his veins.

Loretta sighed, opened her notebook, and struck through an item. “Bar crawling: *not happiness.*”

Sam raised the cane in salute. “Yes. But we’re still going at the Tuba Skinny thing.”

The moment they reached the little square, the horns hit them like a tidal wave. **Tuba Skinny in full brass frenzy**—trumpets darting, clarinets weaving, tuba stomping like a locomotive, washboard rattling like a voodoo spell. The crowd swayed, clapped, whooped, while the air thickened with joy and beer.

Sam froze. His whole ruined carcass seemed to straighten, eyes glowing, soul lit like a lantern. His lips parted—not to speak, but to moan with something dangerously close to ecstasy.

And then he saw her. **Shaye Cohn.** Hair tucked back, cornet in hand, face calm as though she were reading the phone book, while her horn soared into realms where angels file taxes.

Sam leaned toward Loretta, voice gravel-smooth, eyes glued. "I'm having very, very NC-17 forbidden desires about Shaye Cohn."

Loretta blinked. "You happy now?"

Sam shook his head, clutching his chest as the cornet climbed higher. "Absolutely not. I wish I could play that way. I wish I could fondle Shaye Cohn. I can have none of that. But—" he threw his head back, breathless—"I'm floating in jazz galore."

Loretta scribbled, brisk as always:

- Pain to walk here.
- Frustrated desire.
  She slashed through it with a thick line.
  “Strike?”

“Strike.”

“Wanna go away?” she asked, practical as a secretary scheduling death.

Sam’s whole face glowed in brass light, teeth bared in something like religious mania. “For no reason in the world. Listen to this.”

He closed his eyes, arms out, as the band surged into another chorus. “Float with me.”

And for the first time, Loretta didn’t write. She shut her notebook, slipped the pen into her pocket, and let the horns carry her too.

The hotel room could have been anywhere on Earth: beige curtains, beige carpet, beige walls, beige souls. The kind of corporate cubicle disguised as a bedroom where the only real decoration was the framed print of "Generic Landscape #14" bolted to the wall.

Loretta sat at the little desk, notepad open, pen in hand, legs crossed with the efficiency of a stenographer preparing to take down the apocalypse.

"Stendhal syndrome?" she asked.

Sam leaned back on the bed, arms folded under his head, robe splayed open indecently. "Had it once. Van Gogh. Then I had to walk the rest of the museum. Sciatica pain—blinding. Had to sit at every other sofa in the gallery. People thought I was part of the exhibit."

"Opera?"

“First act, almost bursting to pee. Second act, dry mouth, dying of thirst. Torture chamber with an orchestra pit.”

“Readings?”

Sam raised his head proudly. “Of course yes—Hemingway or Bukowski. But Russians? Or 1800s French? Forget it. I need a topographic map just to keep track of the characters.”

Loretta jotted notes, lips pursed. “Just trekking in the Alps, then?”

Sam sat up on one elbow, glaring. “Walking? Really?”

She tried again. “Driving around. Just roaming and listening to music.”

Sam groaned. “The moment I get out of the petrol station I get anxious to refuel. That’s not roaming, that’s panic in motion.”

Loretta slapped the notebook shut, sighed, and stared at him like a disappointed mother. “Sam… fuck off. Nothing really? Nothing makes you happy?”

Sam grinned, rolled onto his side, and muttered into the pillow:
“That’s what I’m paying you for.”

Loretta tapped the notepad against the desk, then muttered under her breath: “I should’ve majored in accounting.”

The monastery clung to the Himalaya like a barnacle on the side of a god. The air was thin, the sky brutally blue, and prayer flags whipped themselves into exhaustion.

Sam sat cross-legged on a stone floor, looking like a man being punished by yoga. Loretta leaned forward, determined.

"Try the *Ohmmmm,*" she instructed.

Sam grunted. "It doesn't work that way."

A monk, bald, serene, and clearly long-suffering, opened one eye. "That's what I've been trying to tell you, lady. It doesn't work this way."

Loretta perked up. "So how does it work then?"

The monk inhaled deeply, hands folded, and began.
He explained.
And explained.
And explained.

Sam glanced at Loretta, deadpan. "We off?"

Loretta closed her notebook with a snap. "Sure thing."

They got up, brushed the dust from their trousers, and started down the trail.

Behind them, the monk kept going.
And explaining.
And explaining.
And explaining.
And explaining.
And explaining.

By the time they were halfway down the mountain, his voice was still echoing in the valley, expounding blissfully to nobody at all.

Sam pulled his coat tighter against the cold. “That’s the thing about enlightenment, Loretta. You can never shut it up.”

They were back in yet another anonymous hotel room—Sam sprawled across the bed in his socks, Loretta perched on the desk chair with her pen poised like an interrogator.

Loretta flipped a page. "Cuddling penguins in Antarctica? Koalas in Australia?"

Sam groaned. "I cuddle a kitten in a litter and wish I could cuddle them all. Not just the litter. *All kitties in the entire world.*"

Loretta frowned, scribbling: *Global feline compulsion, not scalable.*
"Peyote? Hallucinogens?"

Sam rolled onto his side, face buried in the pillow. "I even get panic attacks from a good old joint, these days."

Loretta thumped the desk. "Come on, Sam, you have to give me something."

Sam lifted his head, eyes bloodshot but sharp. “I like to wake up still drunk from the previous night.”

Loretta leaned in. “Does that make you happy?”

Sam’s face cracked into a smile that wasn’t a smile at all. “No. Just… less haunted by life.”

Loretta froze mid-scribble. The pen hovered. “…Wait a minute. Did you say *haunted by life*?”

“Yes. Why?”

Loretta slammed her notebook shut, grabbed his half-finished beer from the nightstand, and stood tall like Joan of Arc armed with lager.

“Hold my beer.”

Sam blinked. “Loretta, what the hell are you—”

She was already pacing, eyes blazing, muttering calculations. The secretary had found her opening.

The quest for happiness was about to get very weird.

They were back in the lair—Grin, Cinderblock, and the whole damned gang seated like a tribunal of the miserable. The bare bulb swung overhead, and Sam sat in the corner, **facepalming so hard his palm was getting drunk off residual gin fumes.**

Loretta stood at the center, notepad in hand, channeling all the solemnity of a courtroom.

“Follow me, gentlemen:

1. The presence of pain is bad.
2. The presence of pleasure is good. However…
3. The absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone.

4. The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.

Therefore—" she slapped her notepad for emphasis—"*non-existence is good. Hence, happiness.*"

Pause. Silence.

Then the whole gang burst into laughter—dark, guttural, the kind that rattled the walls.

Grin leaned forward, teeth flashing like a guillotine. "Oh, come on. Even for Epicureans, that's a loose point. Happiness is *not* the absence of pain. Ataraxia is only the base. The foundation. Happiness builds *on* it."

He jabbed a finger in the air. "It's the state of being more than 'meh.' More than non-existing. It's the pleasure of existing. If you can't even grasp that, don't bother meeting us again."

Sam, without missing a beat, opened his arms wide, cocked his head at Loretta, and gave the room the clearest *"told ya!"* face ever performed by a man in bathrobe and slippers.

Loretta's pen slipped. Her mouth opened, quivered. "But then… then…"

The words hung like a gun not fired, not yet ready, but itching to go off.

Loretta stood trembling in the bare-bulb light, her notepad quivering in her hand like it wanted to desert her. Her voice cracked, climbing into panic.

"Then… then…" She pointed at Sam, jabbing the air like an accusation. "Then if *he*—he, the most miserable, the baseline, the foundation stone—can't

be made happy… not by non-existence, not by death, not even by suicide…"

Her voice collapsed, choked. "…then Schopenhauer was right. There is no happiness. And no way out of it."

The silence hit like a gavel.

Sam, still slouched in his chair with a half-smirk, raised his head. "Unless," he rasped, "every man is happy his own way."

Grin leaned forward, hands steepled, grin crooked. "And then there is no common base for human happiness."

Loretta, still reeling, muttered, "And still… we're still saying *man and men*."

The whole gang groaned in unison, a chorus of disbelieving drunks and pseudo-philosophers. "Oh cut it already!"

Sam spread his arms wider, as if blessing the room with his own uselessness. Loretta sank into the nearest chair, pen dangling, eyes glassy.

And for a long beat, the only sound was the hum of the bulb, swaying, as if even electricity was tired of this debate.

Loretta's pen slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor. She pressed the notepad to her chest and began weeping, shoulders heaving in the damp silence of the gang's lair.

The page, half-smeared with tears and ink, read:

- Happiness: subjective
- Pain: objective
- Tolstoy: was right
- Meaning of life: absence of pain?

- Happiness at the cost of others?
- Monty Python?

Sam leaned forward, his perpetual smirk softening. He took her trembling hand in his, calloused and whiskey-scented, and patted it gently.

“There, there.” His voice rasped with unexpected kindness. “Wanna go to the horse riding school?”

Loretta sniffed, wiped her nose with the back of her wrist. “…I wouldn’t mind.”

Cinderblock and Grin exchanged baffled looks. But neither spoke, because the mood in the room had shifted.

Sam stood, helped Loretta up, and together they walked out. The gang sat behind in silence, staring at the bare bulb, as if trying to decide whether the conversation had just ended in tragedy, revelation, or farce.

At the horse stable, Sam swung the heavy wooden doors shut behind him. Almost immediately, the muffled soundtrack began: Pornhub-style whinnies, rhythmic and unapologetic, and Loretta's voice belting out *"I Feel Pretty"* from *West Side Story* like a Broadway soprano who'd found God in horsepower.

Sam didn't bat an eye. He dropped onto a rough bench outside, pulled the cork from a bottle of scotch with his teeth, and let the burn slide down his throat. The night was cool, the hay smelled sweet, and for once he wasn't running.

Then something soft brushed his boot.

He looked down. A kitten, tiny as a fistful of dawn, stared up at him with eyes too wide for its face. It clawed its way up his trousers with the tenacity of a mountaineer.

Sam chuckled, lifted it to his chest, stroked its back. "Hey, little ghost."

But then another appeared. And another. Tiny paws in the hay, mews like squeaky violin strings. And then—the whole litter. A dozen wriggling fuzzballs stormed him like a furry revolution.

Sam leaned back against the stable wall, arms full of life. Tiny claws pricked, tiny purrs buzzed against him. The scotch bottle tipped in his hand, forgotten, as he pressed his cheek into the pile of kittens.

For a moment—just a moment—his eyes closed, and he thought, *I could cuddle them all. Not just these. All the kittens in the world. Every last one.*

And his lips curved—not into a smirk, not into irony, but into something dangerously close to happiness.

Inside, Loretta hit the high note, the horses roared, and the kittens purred louder.

This is a novel of martinis and metaphysics, comedy and collapse, written in a voice that's part dive-bar confessional, part lounge-act patter, and part philosophy lecture interrupted by kittens.

Alba Pratalia takes readers from smoky bars to glittering casinos to cloistered monasteries, only to end on a bench with the smallest, purest revelation. It's a tragicomedy about what happens when you outsource happiness to a drunk—and what he brings back in return.

"A booze-soaked gospel of misery that somehow manages to laugh harder than it cries."
The New York Times

"Pratalia writes like Camus on a barstool, scribbling philosophy on cocktail napkins."
The Guardian

"Between absurdity and intoxication, a masterpiece of humanity gone astray."
Le Monde

"A noir caught between Kierkegaard and a hangover: tragic and comic in equal measure."
Der Spiegel

"A meditation on happiness and bar tabs with the elegance of ruin."
Financial Times